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DEPT FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND LFREEMAN AND INR JYAPHE

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SUBJECT: YEMEN: CEASEFIRE IMPLEMENTATION CREEPS ALONG IN
SA'ADA

REF: SANAA 275

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The February 12 ceasefire agreement between the ROYG and the Houthi rebels continues to hold, despite reports of violations and foot-dragging by the Houthis. The four geographically oriented mediation committees continue to make slow progress, with greater success in Malahit and the Saudi border areas and less success in Sa'ada City and Harf Sufyan. The Houthi leadership, which appears to be struggling to control its organization, also accuses government elements in Sa'ada of violating the ceasefire agreement. Unfortunately, the ROYG's long-standing opposition to the use of international observers, its lack of strategic thinking and the continuing opacity of the Houthis' true intentions will make achieving a permanent end to the conflict difficult. END SUMMARY.

SLOW PROGRESS BEING MADE

¶2. (C) ROYG and Houthi sources agree that substantive progress has been made in implementing the ceasefire agreement in two of the four geographically oriented mediation committees: the Malahit and Saudi border area committees have succeeded in disarmament, landmine removal and securing the participation of Houthi representatives. Mohammed al-Hawiri, head of the Saudi border committee, said that 70 percent of tasks had been completed in his area, according to February 17 local media reports. High-level Houthi leaders are participating in both committees, according to Hassan Zayd, the al-Haq party secretary general with close Houthi contacts. Independent confirmation of progress is difficult because the ROYG has refused international observers access to Sa'ada because the mediation committees "represent all interests," according to Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Rashad al-Alimi.

¶3. (C) Significant challenges remain in Sa'ada City and Harf Sufyan (Amran governorate) where Houthi representatives have failed to participate, roads are reopening slowly and the Houthis are refusing to remove heavy artillery, according to Alimi. Ruling General People's Congress (GPC) Permanent Committee member and Bakil tribal confederation leader Mohammed Abulahoum told PolOff on February 17 that the committee from Harf Sufyan (part of Bakil territory) was "moving along very slowly." (Note: On the day PolOff visited Abulahoum, dozens of sheikhs from Harf Sufyan were at his Sana'a house to discuss problems with the implementation of the ceasefire agreement. End Note.) Zayd agreed that Sa'ada City was problematic, although he attributed it to the military's aggressive behavior in searching the city for weapons and intimidating the population.

BUT VIOLATIONS CONTINUE

14. (C) Both sides report violations of the ceasefire agreement. In a joint February 22 briefing for the diplomatic corps, Alimi and Foreign Minister Abubakir al-Qirbi said the Houthis have, since the February 12 ceasefire agreement: demolished four civilian homes, killed six government soldiers and wounded 35, killed two civilians and kidnapped 19, and destroyed three government buildings. Local media reported on February 20 that the Houthis attempted to block the deployment of government troops to the Saudi border region. The Houthis, who reportedly vacated the area on February 16, accused the military of initiating fighting, Zayd told PolOff on February 23. Zayd added that although the Houthis had removed many checkpoints in the roads to and through Sa'ada, the military was not allowing civilians or the Houthis to use them.

15. (C) ROYG officials painted a picture of the Houthis as an unreliable, sometimes unwilling partner in the peace process.

"There is unanimity that the Houthis don't know what they want," Qirbi said. Rebel leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi added conditions that Alimi called unacceptable - removal of government checkpoints and redeployment of Sa'ada-based ROYG security forces. The Houthis are also refusing to surrender removed landmines to the Yemeni military, according to Alimi.

Given such perceived intransigence, the ROYG is worried that the "Houthis are trying to use the ceasefire just to give their fighters a rest. We hope this is not the case," Qirbi said. Another lingering issue is the return of Saudi POWs. Three of the five prisoners held by the Houthis have been

returned to Saudi Arabia, according to ROYG officials and local media reports. The Houthis claim they do not have the other two prisoners, who, according to Zayd, might be dead. The Houthis have complained about Saudi Arabia's refusal to release Houthi POWs. (Note: Saudi Assistant Defense Minister Prince Khaled bin Sultan said the Saudis had over 500 "infiltrators," according to local press reports. End Note.)

16. (C) It appears that the Houthis, and perhaps to a lesser extent the ROYG, are having trouble controlling elements of their organizations. Qirbi complained about Houthi "elements that have a vested interest in seeing the war continue" and were therefore blocking the peace process. On the other hand, Abdulmalik al-Houthi lamented the "continuing obstacles and violations by warlords and some influential figures who do not seek peace" in a February 16 statement on Houthi media outlet almenpar.com. Zayd said that the continued presence of Salafis, specifically at Sa'ada's Dimaj Institute, and Northwest Regional Commander Brigadier General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, perceived by many as the architect of the Sa'ada War, were obstacles to a permanent peace. "There are a lot of individuals on the ground doing their own thing) on both sides," Zayd said.

PREVENTING A SEVENTH WAR

17. (C) Reconstruction has not yet begun, and Qirbi said any significant rebuilding will wait until there is confidence that the war will not resume again. Prime Minister Ali Mujawwar, who hosted the first reconstruction committee meeting last week, plans to hold a second meeting after a full assessment of needs on the ground is complete. Although UN Permanent Representative Pratibha Mehta said the UN had been planning to reopen its Sa'ada City office, Alimi said the time was not right for international organizations to re-establish a presence in Sa'ada. Alimi said "local governments" should return first and re-establish security before any international organizations returned. According to Mehta and Zayd, the IDP population is not returning to Sa'ada, which both attributed to the displaced taking a "wait and see" approach.

18. (C) Consumed with the mechanics of disarming a

thousands-strong rebel army and attempting to reassert control over de facto enemy territory, the ROYG has not yet focused on a long-term solution to the conflict. President Saleh has suggested that the Houthis form a political party in order to reintegrate into the legitimate political process. The GPC's Abulahoum said that his conversations within the ruling party leadership and with the Saudis in February led him to believe that President Saleh intended to give the Houthis greater political autonomy in Sa'ada along with a robust development package, although the president has not announced this publicly. The Houthis' long-term goals also remain unclear. According to a mid-February statement by Houthi spokesman Abdusalam al-Zabiah, the Houthis want: 1) the release of detainees, 2) security in Sa'ada, 3) local councils to take over governance, 4) protection of all civilians (including those who fought with the Houthis), 5) compensation for war damage, and 6) religious freedom. (Comment: The majority of these conditions appear more applicable to a short-term ceasefire and less useful in establishing a long-term solution to the underlying causes of the Houthi rebellion. End Comment.)

COMMENT

19. (C) President Saleh and his government appear to be genuinely concerned that the current ceasefire may not hold. The ROYG, however, says it is struggling to find an equally committed partner in the Houthis. While divining the rebels' true intentions is a huge challenge, the ROYG's predictable but nonetheless unfortunate refusal to consider international observers and its lack of strategic, innovative thinking on permanent solutions to the problem are also unhelpful. How will the ROYG go about rehabilitating and reintegrating a war-torn governorate of 800,000 people? The chattering classes, already talking about when the "seventh war" will begin, are not being facetious. Sooner rather than later, the ROYG needs to develop a long-term solution that destroys the roots of the Houthi rebellion and puts a permanent end to the Sa'ada conflict. END COMMENT.
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